

BLACK REFUGEE STUDENTS IN MANITOBA

“Current approaches to refugee education,” Rebeca Heringer begins, “tend to fall short of providing a genuine hospitable education because they remain informed and dictated by White, patronizing, and unethical structures even if disguised by ‘good intentions,’ such as those that are *for* the Other (e.g., discourses of care, compassion, or empathy) and those that are *about* the Other (e.g., multicultural education).”²¹ She judges that the “ethic of hospitality, however, is not only underused in empirical educational studies (let alone as an analytical lens for the experiences of refugee students), but its use in tandem with self-determination theory appears to be a novelty that this research brought forth, which demonstrated to be a pertinent and helpful framework to assist educators in planning for refugee education that is genuinely welcoming.”²² Heringer reports that “this “research was informed by and designed based on the ethic of hospitality, self-determination theory, and the tenets of critical race theory.”²³ Citing Jacques Derrida and Claudia Ruitenberg, she explains that “the ethic of hospitality, in a nutshell, posits that genuine hospitality is necessarily unpredictable, necessarily unconditional, and therefore, necessarily uncomfortable for the host.”²⁴ Heringer continues: “The host can make arrangements to receive the unknown guest who may arrive at an unknown time, but the arrival of the guest also marks the end of the host’s arrangements as the guest must have agency to make changes in the environment,” adding that “hospitality will never look the same for different students and it will only take place if the host and the home (in the present case, teachers and schools) are transformed by the arrival of the guest (i.e., the student)—and what such transformation could entail is what this research sought to investigate.”²⁵

From “hospitality” Heringer turns to “critical race theory (CRT),” which she regards as “pivotal to the current study, for it demonstrates how race functions as a central pillar of hegemonic power.”²⁶ “The ethic of hospitality in light of CRT,” she suggests, “evidences the resistance (conscious or not) that a White teacher might experience when receiving a Black student in their class, seeking to reproduce, reinforce, and sustain the White home (be that the school or the teacher’s self) to the detriment of the knowledge, experience, and interests of the Black refugee.”²⁷ Next, citing Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, is “self-determination theory (SDT)” which, she explains, “stems from the assumption that people are naturally agentic, eager to learn, and eager to apply newly acquired skills responsibly.”²⁸ She references the Ryan-Deci identification of “three innate human psychological needs that are the foundation for one’s self-motivation and consequent well-being and flourishing: *autonomy* (behaving according to one’s authentic values and interests), *competence* (feeling able to operate effectively within their important life contexts), and *relatedness* (feeling socially connected, cared for, belonging, and feeling significant among others).”²⁹ Heringer finds these concepts “helpful in evidencing how hospitable education has been to students.”³⁰ I didn’t realize concept could function as “evidence.”

Evidence she has, at least “data collected through the interviews,” which Heringer gathered by employing a “purposeful snowball sampling” – also known as chain sampling or network sampling³¹ - “to recruit five Black refugee students with the support of community centres in Winnipeg.”³² Then Heringer conducted an “inductive thematic analysis,” this

enabling her to “familiarize myself with the data and to organize it according to emergent themes.”¹³ Next she “coded” the “data,” organizing “the emerging themes in light of the three innate psychological needs outlined by SDT; namely, autonomy, competence, and relatedness.”¹⁴ Heringer cites the Ryan-Deci theorization that “non-intrinsically motivated practices can become *internalized* (i.e., values and regulations can be taken in) and *integrated* (i.e., a transformation of the self, which allows for those practices to emanate from their sense of self),” presumably a “way toward self-determination.”¹⁵ The qualifying verb in the last sentence – “can” – is followed by another qualifying verb phrase in the following sentence: “So, while the apparent internalization and integration of Eurocentric values and practices encountered by students in Manitoba classes could be contributing to their autonomy and hence their well-being, it is also possible that their motivation remains external, merely as a response to the context, and its rewards and punishments (e.g., being accepted or excluded by others).”¹⁶ Is it not also possible that “Eurocentric values and practices” – does Heringer mean simply European-descent people generally or, more specifically, parochial even xenophobic European-descent people? – weren’t internalized or integrated at all by non-European-descent students? Or, is it not also possible these students were in effect fleeing their native cultures – they the children of political refugees – and were therefore eagerly embracing the “values and practices” they encountered in Manitoba? On the face of it, Heringer’s possibility seems no more probable than these others.

Qualifying verbs continue when Heringer reports that “the underlying message that students like Kamali seemed to want to convey is that they felt accepted *in spite of racism*.”¹⁷ Underlying? Like Kamali? To name one African or African-descent person “like” another slips toward stereotyping. Seemed? Heringer’s dependence on what seems like speculation does not build confidence in her methodology or her judgement, so I’m unable to suspend my skepticism entirely when she writes, contradicting “students like Kamali” that: “However, I also observed that throughout the whole interview she was hesitant to make negative remarks about her schooling experiences,” an observation encouraging Heringer to speculate: “This may be potential evidence of how power relations play out, compounded with the fear of consequences if the participant critiqued the school system.”¹⁸ “May be”? “Potential evidence”?

From qualifying verbs Heringer moves to passive ones, reporting that “feeling powerless to change a distressing situation was pervasively noted in the interviews,” this “noted” due to this: “Hiba, for example, mentioned how she struggled with a racist teacher in a course she was taking and, finding no solution (even after talking to the principal), felt compelled to drop the course,” meaning that “she would have to re-take the course in the summer, which was not what she had desired, ‘just to avoid that teacher’.”¹⁹ Heringer reports that “students often commented how their views were ignored by teachers (and principals) during and outside of class time,” citing the “example” of Yonas, who reported “he feels free to ask questions, [but] he also observed that there are teachers who have laughed at him (and at other newcomers) ‘because of my pronunciation’ which then ‘blocks you’.”²⁰ There were teachers who laughed at students? If accurate, that could constitute professional malpractice. Failing to report the teachers’ versions of these events could constitute research malpractice.

In the next sentence we learn these “refugee students” were all “placed in the English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes indistinctly, disregarding their previous English skills

and their willingness to be placed in regular classes—an aspect to be further observed in the competence domain.”²¹ From that datum Heringer generalizes, concluding that the entire “school thus becomes a double agent of un-welcoming, creating a space where the student may no longer face the immediacy of risks related to their refugee status, but constantly being reminding that their self is not fully welcome here either.”²² The Collins dictionary defines “feeling welcome” this way: “If you welcome someone, you greet them in a friendly way when they arrive somewhere.”²³ If English weren’t my native tongue, it would be by definition an “additional” language, would it not? If fluent in English, then being assigned to a class that implied I was not would be irksome, but not necessarily unwelcoming, at least by the dictionary definition of the term. But then Heringer isn’t consulting a dictionary, instead relying on an “ethic of hospitality”²⁴ that affords the guest [the] agency to make changes in the environment,” an ethic that to my mind would make inviting guests potentially perilous, unless of course one didn’t mind one’s home being rearranged by someone – an interior designer – not hired to do so. “Contrary to what would be expected from an autonomy-supportive teacher,” Heringer writes, “the students’ narratives reveal how they often had to comply with ‘controlling teachers [who] pressure students to think, feel, or behave in particular ways while relating to the students from their own (the teachers’) perspectives rather than from the students’ perspectives” – she is here quoting Ryan and Deci — “thus a major factor impinging on students’ autonomy, which would surely be necessary in the provision of a hospitable environment.”²⁵ Students’ “autonomy” are “impinged” upon in every class they take, unless the course is not a course in any ordinary sense but instead an opportunity to do whatever students want to do, something to which I’m not necessarily opposed.

Switching from SDT to CRT, Heringer moves from autonomy impingement to “interest convergence,” about which CRT “has long warned, ... “as schools can portray themselves as ‘welcoming to Black refugees’ but have no interest in who the Black refugee student is, how they feel, or what they think,” what she terms a “model of conditional hospitality” wherein “the guest’s agency is thwarted by the power of the host,” apparently compromising the student’s “identity.”²⁶ Heringer goes even further, concluding that “what is at play here is an outright decision to welcome the refugee-as-a-victim, the powerless, the voiceless, but not their undesirable different ideas, knowledge, and experiences.”²⁷ Next comes “competence,” prompting Heringer to write: “While it is arguably natural to some extent that students may take time to adjust to a new environment and a language they are not yet familiar with, what emerged as worrisome were the ways in which students felt belittled in the long term, both by classmates and by educators.”²⁸ Alleging that “racism is ordinary and normalized,” that “being White in a White society still grants asymmetrical power to Whites,” Heringer then asserts that “being a White host further centralizes Whiteness,”²⁹ even when that teacher wants to extend hospitality. Does Heringer define “White” as ideological – or as anyone of European descent (not all of whom are pale skinned of course.) She continues: “[T]he pathological and deficit approach toward Black people continues to dictate actions in institutions and social relations.”³⁰ Apparently relying solely on these five students’ allegations, Heringer reports that “teachers would often tell newcomer students about their need to take English classes with a disparaging tone,” that one student “did not feel encouraged to do so by the teacher’s pathologizing remarks,” and when enrolled, students complained about “the fast pace of regular classes and how teachers were often unresponsive to their individual

needs.”³¹ Again relying on Ryan and Deci, she suggests that “competence is thwarted” in the face of criticism.³² Not so with these students apparently: “In order to be able to relate with classmates and keep up with the classes, therefore, students quickly decided to find ways to improve their English skills, whether through watching videos online, going to the library, or other ways.”³³ Heringer is unimpressed, however, concluding that “their behaviours often appeared to be associated with conscious valuing, ego-involvement, or compliance, rather than pure enjoyment and inherent satisfaction.”³⁴ These students have been doomed from the start, it seems: “Especially in colonizing contexts such as Canada, language is easily used as a weapon to criminalize, (further) disempower, and continuously marginalize the guest by ascribing incompetence,” forced to ask for hospitality in a foreign language, the host disinterested in learning the language of the guest.³⁵ Were these students criminalized?

Next is “relatedness,” concerning which Heringer writes: “The need to feel cared for and to care for others, and the need to feel belongingness and connectedness were greatly evident in the interviews, both in relation to classmates and educators, with race/racism playing a major role in their experiences.”³⁶ Again she slips from interview data – again, from the students only – to theory, writing that “not only are students constantly bombarded with the stigmatized and stereotyped images of Black people, as CRT scholars have constantly pointed out, but also forced to pass as White—in other words, being complicit with White expectations so as not to suffer (more) from Whites’ ‘fragility’.”³⁷ Heringer then makes the obvious point that “being physically received into a new environment is not necessarily synonymous with hospitality,” adding that, from “a SDT angle, the perceived walls among classmates and feeling ignored by educators certainly shows how the need for relatedness is not satisfied by simply being around others.”³⁸ “A hospitable environment,” she explains, “requires a healthy host–guest (and guest–guest) relationship,” adding: “Students expressed how they felt cared for when teachers would stop to talk to them, showing interest in their experiences and knowledge. They were able to perceive a genuine smile from some teachers as a welcoming gesture.”³⁹ So the students’ experience was not only negative? Again, Heringer slides from data to theory, returning to Ryan and Deci to make yet another obvious point, namely (quoting Ryan and Deci): “According to SDT, ‘people can experience *relatedness* while helping others, through a sense of empathy and interest in others, and their active involvement on the others’ behalf,” from which Heringer concludes: “Therefore, despite the adverse circumstances, one possible way in which students’ need of relatedness was being satisfied was through their contributing to other refugees’ well-being.”⁴⁰ The teachers may have been awful – except when they smiled and showed “interest in their experiences and knowledge” – but at least the students had each other. Did they?

In the final section of the article – titled “discussion” – Heringer tells us that: “Acknowledging the self as process, fluid, and not as an object, does not necessarily make this process supportive of their autonomy either,” adding: “In fact, the interviews revealed how often the dynamic nature of the self can be hostile and alienating to students.”⁴¹ How, exactly? “Feeling pressured to speak and behave differently in order to be accepted, witnessing racism but feeling powerless to make any changes, being responded to irresponsibly, and having limited agency/voice in their education were some of the ways in which students’ autonomy appeared to be in jeopardy.”⁴² Appeared? Did not students’ candor verify their continuing autonomy? “[T]he overcontrol experienced by students and the generalization that all

newcomers must be placed in EAL classes irrespective of their strengths and interests was perceived as strongly alienating to some participants.”⁴³ Some? How many of the five, exactly? Of course, “snowball sampling” doesn’t imply comprehensiveness but quite the contrary, as it is non-random, leaving open the possibility that Heringer chose only those students whose testimony supported SDT and CRT.

Heringer returns to Ryan and Deci to say “how important awareness and mindfulness are for self-regulation,” surely a statement that needs unpacking, but which Heringer uses to write: “Thus, by not explaining to students the idea/ role/purpose of EAL classes, schools further prevented students from performing their education autonomously,” apparently producing a state of “mindlessness [that] leads individuals to being more at risk of being controlled—hence fostering *automatic* rather than *autonomous* behaviour.”⁴⁴ Mindlessness? Would not such a condition undermine the authenticity and authority of these students’ statements? Heringer notes that Ryan and Deci distinguish “mastery” from “performance,” associating the former with “competence” or “knowledge,” the latter with “doing well relative to others” (that phrase is Ryan and Deci’s), from which Heringer derives the following obvious conclusion: “As such, performance goals may increase academic achievement but are not associated with enhanced wellness.”⁴⁵ These five students, she reports, discussed “feelings of belonging, caring/being cared for, and significance,” although “with a mix of enthusiasm and despair, especially with regards to classmates, teachers, and principals,” for Heringer “evidencing” that not all social interaction satisfies a sense of relatedness or satisfies basic psychological needs.”⁴⁶ She concludes:

Despite their adaptation and academic achievements over time, this study revealed several roadblocks to Black refugee students’ self-determination and thus feeling genuinely welcome in Manitoba schools. Feeling ignored, undermined, and ridiculed by educators and classmates because of their skin colour and perceived lack of English shows how the need for relatedness is not satisfied simply by teachers’ friendliness, and hospitality does take place merely by being around others in a ‘safe’ environment.⁴⁷

The small sample size – recall she spoke to only five students - does not permit Heringer to make any generalizations about “Manitoba schools.” Moreover, the snowball sampling method risks subsuming students’ testimony in the author’s theoretical preferences, themselves in tension with each other, as SDT is context-blind and CRT is all about context. If any students felt “ignored, undermined, and ridiculed by educators and classmates because of their skin colour and perceived lack of English” an official inquiry is called for. If these charges are substantiated, teachers need to be reprimanded, retrained, if not fired. If these charges cannot be substantiated, the Manitoba Teachers’ Society⁴⁸ should sue for defamation.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

¹ 2023, 58.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. For Derrida, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/> For Ruitenbergh, see her 2015 *Unlocking the World*.

⁵ 2023, 58-59.

⁶ 2023, 59. For CRT, see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory> and <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 2023, 60.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/snowball-sampling/#:~:text=Snowball%20sampling%20is%20a%20non-probability%20sampling%20method%20where,to%20identify%20%28e.g.%2C%20people%20with%20a%20rare%20disease%29>

¹² 2023, 60.

¹³ 2023, 61.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 2023, 62.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 2023, 63.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 2023, 64.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/feel-welcome>

²⁴ 2023, 64.

²⁵ 2023, 64-65.

²⁶ 2023, 65.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 2023, 66.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 2023, 66-67.

³² 2023, 67.

³³ 2023, 68.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ 2023, 69.

³⁷ 2023, 70.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ 2023, 71.

⁴¹ 2023, 72.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ 2023, 73.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ 2023, 74.

⁴⁸ <https://www.mbteach.org/mtscms/2016/05/06/who-we-are/>